

## 27 Other issues

### 27.1 Code of conduct and conflict of interest

As knowledge provider ICES gives a high priority to credibility, legitimacy, transparency and accountability of their work. In this context, it is essential that experts contributing to ICES science and advice maintain scientific independence, integrity and impartiality. In addition, behaviours and actions of members should minimise any risk of actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest. A conflict of interest arises when there is an actual, potential or perceived possibility that a member of the group makes a contribution to ICES work that is not based on a systematic scientific review of the available information and evidence or when decisions or outcomes may be influenced, or are perceived to be influenced, by self-interest or external pressures and other factors.

The Code of Conduct drawn up by ICES is to ensure transparency and responsibility in ICES work and to preserve the role of ICES as knowledge provider. The code of conduct applies to scientists participating in ICES Expert Groups, Review and Advice Drafting Groups as well as ACOM and SCICOM meetings.

ICES has requested the chairs of the working group to address the Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest at the start of the meeting. All participants at the meeting, including the chairs, are required to declare any Conflicts of Interest and their commitment to agree with the Code of Conduct before their work commences. In 2020, all participants, including the chairs, declared no Conflict of Interest and agreed to abide with the Code of Conduct.

### 27.2 Joint ICES-ICCAT meeting

One of the ToRs for WGEF 2020 was to further develop proposed ToRs for a potential joint ICES-ICCAT meeting in 2020 to (i) assess porbeagle shark and (ii) collate available biological and fishery data on thresher sharks in the Atlantic.

In 2009, ICES and ICCAT held a joint meeting to coordinate their respective work on elasmobranchs. Issues considered at this meeting included fisheries, species-specific landings data and biological parameters being collected on the NEACS. Assessments for the NE Atlantic stocks of spurdog *Squalus acanthias* and porbeagle *Lamna nasus* were undertaken and the results were published in an ICES report (ICES, 2009).

Another joint meeting, focussing on porbeagle had been proposed for 2020. Due to COVID-19, it was impossible to organise an in-person meeting and it was decided to cancel the joint meeting. ICCAT continued the work on porbeagle and organised an online meeting (15–22 June) to discuss the northwest Atlantic and southern hemisphere porbeagle stocks. The aim of the meeting was to assemble and review all available porbeagle information and assess the status of the stocks. Members of WGEF responsible for the Northeast Atlantic porbeagle assessment have attended the online meeting. It is envisaged to organise a joint ICES-ICCAT meeting to collaborate and revisit (i.e. benchmark) the assessment of the Northeast Atlantic porbeagle stock in 2022. This joint ICES-ICCAT meeting would be very timely, given that ICES advice for this stock is scheduled for 2023.

## 27.3 Follow recommendations from WKSHARK5

One of the recurring issues in WGEF is the lack of discard data in the assessment. This prevents the shift from providing landings advice to catch advice. Despite two dedicated workshops on the use of discard data in stock assessments (WKSHARK3 and WKSHARK5), it is still difficult to move forward on this issue. In WGEF 2020, a discard table has been configured collating the submitted discard data available in the WGEF accessions folders. This overview demonstrates there is a high number of discrepancies between years and data are inconsistent or missing. It was decided that the discard data available to the group were not of sufficient quality to use in the assessments at this stage for most of the stocks. Moreover, the issues exposed by both WKSHARK3 and WKSHARK5 are too complex to be solved during the Expert Group meeting. A proper review of the available discard data as well as issues in terms of raising, data quality, discard retention patterns and survival is needed.

In WGEF 2020, ICES guidelines for first time catch advice were consulted for two stocks of cuckoo ray in the Bay of Biscay and Iberian waters (rjn.27.8c and rjn.27.9a). These are in line with the proposal made in WKSHARK5 on how to include discard information into the advisory process for elasmobranch fishes. Here, the North Sea thornback ray (*Raja clavata*) was used as an example stock to test the raising procedure and advice method. The regular advice for 2018 and 2019 for *R. clavata* in Subarea 4 and divisions 3.a and 7.d based on previous landings is compared with an advice for 2018 and 2019 when catch data would have been used (ICES, 2020).

In the WGEF 2019 report, it was already recommended that ICES initiate a dialogue with DG Mare to explore the possibility of funding or initiate a project to address the serious issues surrounding the collection and registration of discard data, as well as how to include survivability, in order for the data to be used in future stock assessments. This recommendation still applies to discussions in WGEF 2020.

## 27.4 Follow recommendations from WSKATE

In the WGEF 2019 meeting, a number of discrepancies in the survey data-base and survey use in the assessments were highlighted and discussed. For the assessment methods, it was discussed to standardize and revisit the methods for calculating survey indices. As the indices are fundamental for the work within WGEF, the group decided a dedicated workshop on the use of surveys in the stock assessments should be organised (WSKATE). The intention was to have the meeting prior to the 2020 WGEF meeting. However, due to a multitude of meetings for this group in early 2020, WSKATE was postponed and was held in November 2020. Given the large task, the meeting will be staggered, with the first meeting in 2020 for the stocks to be assessed in WGEF 2021, and another workshop in 2022 for the remaining stocks.

During the 2020 WGEF meeting, serious issues with the planning and execution of Portuguese fisheries surveys were noted. These surveys are essential for advice on fishing opportunities on elasmobranchs in Iberian waters. A different approach using a commercial standardized LPUE time-series index of the Portuguese fleet was presented. While this method is already been applied to blonde ray in Division 9.a (Atlantic Iberian waters), the Expert Group decided an evaluation of the method was required before being applied to other stocks. As such, the use of a commercial standardized LPUE for some of the Iberian stocks was explored and reviewed within WSKATE 2021 (ICES, 2021a).

## 27.5 WSKATE Scheduling

In 2019, it was agreed that a dedicated workshop was needed to examine the use of surveys in the assessment of elasmobranchs. New surveys and time series and a lack of standardization amongst stocks meant that current assessment inputs and combination methods may no longer be the best sources of information on stock status. A Workshop on the use of surveys for stock assessment and Reference Points for Rays and Skates (WSKATE) was proposed and accepted by ACOM.

WSKATE was successfully held online in November 2020 (ICES, 2021a). Primarily due to constraints caused by COVID-19, it was decided prior to the meeting to concentrate on stocks that were due to be assessed by WGEF in 2021, namely skates and ray stocks in the North Sea. It was also decided to examine skate and ray stocks in Biscay and Iberia that were affected by the cessation of Portuguese surveys. It was therefore planned to hold a second WSKATE workshop in late 2021/early 2022 that would examine stocks due for assessment by WGEF in 2022, particularly skate and ray stocks in the Celtic Seas Ecoregion. A third and final workshop (WSKATE3) would examine the surveys used to assess the remaining stocks, primarily sharks, including catsharks, in 2023 or 2024.

It became clear during WGEF 2021 that there were very large time demands being made on ICES elasmobranch experts in 2021 and 2022. In addition to the proposed WSKATE2 meeting, ICES has scheduled a SPICT workshop that members would be expected to attend, as SPICT is proposed for use in Category 3 assessments in 2022. Training will be required prior to this workshop for some experts. There is also a benchmark assessment for four elasmobranch stocks in Spring 2022 and the required Data Evaluation Workshop prior to this, expected in November 2021.

Because of the competing time pressures, and the fact that the outputs of the SPICT workshop may affect how Celtic Seas stocks are assessed in 2022, it was decided to defer the WSKATE2 workshop until after WGEF 2022, likely November 2022.

## 27.6 Expected surveys issues due to COVID-19

COVID-19 induced some disruptions or changes in the planning of scientific surveys. As these surveys are crucial to the assessment work of WGEF, the group made an inventory of the surveys. Hereby the participants indicated whether surveys were carried out or not in 2020 and what is expected for 2021. Table 26.6.1 shows the outcome of the inventory. With the exception of Portuguese surveys which are uncertain, it is not expected there will be major gaps in the planning of the scientific surveys. Of course, it cannot be stated with any certainty that surveys will be carried out as this will depend on the situation with COVID-19 at that point in time.

**Table 26.6.1. Expected continuation of relevant surveys for elasmobranch assessments under COVID-19.**

Country	Survey	Availability of 2020 data	Availability of 2021 data (surveys in the first semester)	Expected continuation in 2021 (surveys in the second semester)
Belgium	NS-BTS-Q3	Yes		Yes
Netherlands	NS-BTS-Q3	Yes		Yes
	NS-IBTS-Q1	Yes	Yes	
France	FR-CGFS-Q4	Yes		Yes
	FR-EVHOE-Q4	Yes (see section 26.7)		Yes
	NS-IBTS-Q1	Yes	Yes	
Germany	NS-IBTS-Q1	Yes	Yes	
Denmark	NS-IBTS-Q1	Yes	Yes	
	NS-IBTS-Q3	Yes		Yes
UK	UK(E&W)-BTS-Q3	Yes		Yes
	NS-IBTS-Q3	Yes		Yes
Ireland	IGFS-WIBTS-Q4	Yes		Yes
Norway	NS-IBTS-Q1	Yes	Yes	
	NS-IBTS-Q3	Yes		Yes
Sweden	NS-IBTS-Q1	Yes	Yes	
Spain	SpGFS-WIBTS-Q4	Yes		Yes
	SpGFS-GC-WIBTS-Q1	Yes	Yes	
	SP-ARSA-Q1	yes	No	
	SP-ARSA-Q4	Yes		Yes
Portugal	PtGFS-WIBTS-Q4	Yes		uncertain
	ARQDAÇO	No		?

## 27.7 Other survey issues

In 2020, the FR-CGFS survey in the Eastern English Channel (Division 7.d) sampled only French waters because the request for authorisation to work in UK waters was not sent to UK authorities in due time. For some stocks, the effect of the lack of sampling in UK waters on biomass indicators was estimated by comparing the indicator calculated with all sampled strata to the indicator calculated excluding strata not sampled in 2020. For stocks where the impact or the missing strata was large or could be not assessed, the year 2020 of CGFS was excluded from the biomass index. Table 26.7.1 describes the way the lack of CGFS data was handled for stocks where this survey is suitable.

**Table 26.7.1. Handling of the lack of sampling from CGFS-Q4 in UK waters in 2020 for assessment and advice.**

Stock	Survey used in the biomass indicator	Use of CGFS-Q4 data
rjc.27.3a47d	IBST-Q1, IBTS-Q3, BTS-ENG-Q3, BTS-BE-Q3, CGFS-Q4	2020 data excluded
rjc.27.4c7d	CGFS-Q4	2020 data excluded (index A for the index ratio based on 2019 only)
syc.27.3a47d	IBST-Q1, IBTS-Q3, BTS-Eng-Q3, CGFS Q4, BTS-BE-Q3	2020 data excluded
sdv.27.nea	IBTS-Q1, IBTS-Q3, EVHOE-WIBTS-Q4, CGFS-Q4, IGFS-WIBTS-Q4	2020 data used (impact of missing strata estimated minor)
syt.27.67	UK(E&W)-BTS-Q3, CGFS-Q4	2020 data excluded

In 2019, both PtGFS-WIBTS-Q4 and NepS (FU 28–29) were not conducted due to legal constraints of national scope that turned unfeasible the hiring of fishing and vessel crew on time to undertake the survey. In 2020, the NepS (FU 28–29) was still not conducted, due to the same issue; and the PtGFS-WIBTS-Q4 survey was carried out in the new RV “Mário Ruivo” (Dimensions = 75.6 m \* 15 m, Ton = 2290 tonnes) and only 6% of the planned number of fishing hauls was achieved; this was due to a combination of legal/logistic constraints and COVID-19 pandemic that largely delayed the start of the survey until the end of the official time period (4th quarter) and year. The two surveys are planned to be conducted in 2021 in the RV “Mário Ruivo”.

## 27.8 Future benchmarks

In contrast to many other assessment Expert Groups, WGEF has few stocks that has gone through a benchmark process. So far, two deep-water shark species (i.e. *Centrophorus squamosus* and *Centroscyrmnus coelolepis*) were part of the benchmark assessment of deep-water stocks in 2010 (WKDEEP; ICES, 2010a) and a benchmark assessment for spurdog (*Squalus acanthias*) was carried out through correspondence in 2021 (ICES, 2021b). In recent years, more effort has been made into exploring new assessment models and acquiring relevant data for assessments. As a result, in 2020, WGEF proposed potential benchmarks for several stocks which will be held in 2022 and 2023.

### Porbeagle

A joint ICES-ICCAT meeting focussing on porbeagle was planned for 2020. This joint meeting would form the basis for the preparatory work to conduct a benchmark on the Northeast Atlantic porbeagle stock in 2021. At the joint meeting, available data as well as assessment methodologies (e.g. SPiCT) would be evaluated. Due to COVID-19, the joint meeting was cancelled and it has been agreed to postpone the benchmark to 2022 which is line with the update of the assessment in 2023.

The current timeline for the benchmark consists of preparatory work done during WGEF 2021. During the meeting, new data on tagging and genetic work was presented. Also, the preparatory work may include an update of SPiCT, but may also address new assessment methods developed within ICCAT to assess the North-western and Southern hemisphere stocks. In addition, a data preparation workshop will be held late November 2021, followed by a benchmark meeting in March 2022. The benchmark is likely to become a joint ICES-ICCAT workshop.

### Rays assemblage in the North Sea and Bay of Biscay

In 2020 WGEF, several research studies exploring and evaluating methods to estimate population size of rays have been presented. The studies ranged from using genetic approaches (Close-

kin Mark recapture) to using surplus production models and multispecies models (State-Space Bayesian Models). While most studies are ongoing, the presented results looked promising and capable of moving the assessments of several stocks to a next level (i.e. quantitative analyses and reference points). The methods presented are submitted as Working Documents and can be found on the 2020 WGEF SharePoint. As such, it was decided to initiate the process towards a benchmark for several ray stocks at once. It was decided to first have a benchmark for the Bay of Biscay (rjc.27.8), Celtic sea (rjn.27.678abd) and English Channel (rju.27.7de) stocks in 2022 as these stocks are up for advice in 2023. The three North Sea stocks (rjc.27.3a47d, rjm.27.3a47d and rjh.27.4c7d) will follow with a benchmark in 2023, being the year in which new advice is requested. As these stocks will go through a benchmark for the first time, ICES guidelines for the ICES benchmark process will need to be followed. This means, the quality of the available data as well as issues identified by the stock assessor should be evaluated. Working documents on the methods should be made available and presented to the Expert Group. A data compilation workshop will be held in late 2021, followed by the benchmark in March 2022 (WKELASMO).

## 27.9 References

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